

THE FRONT

BURIED TREASURE

IN SEARCH OF ELECTRONIC GOLD

In 1991, Prefab Sprout frontman **PADDY MCALOON** was struck down with serious illness that led to perhaps his boldest work, 2003's 'I Trawl The Megahertz', a fever-dream of skittish longing that deserves ear time

Words: **JOOLS STONE**



How would you battle a bout of chronic insomnia and two detached retinas threatening your sight? Perhaps you'd seek refuge in late-night talk radio, but if you're Prefab Sprout frontman Paddy McAloon you might start thinking about how these broadcasts could be turned into material for an album.

Following eye surgery in the early 1990s, McAloon was unable to work and so passed the time by listening to radio phone-ins and TV chat shows. He recorded many hours of audio that he'd go on to mine for fragments of speech set to a jazzy, quasi-classical backing on a glimmering spectre of a record, his 2003 debut solo album 'I Trawl The Megahertz'.

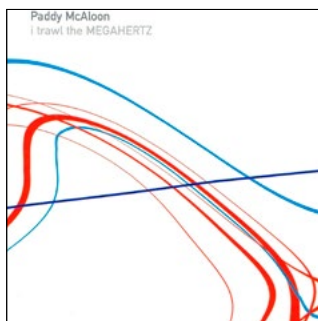
The album's score, with orchestral arrangements by David McGuinness and featuring classical ensemble Mr McFall's Chamber, is ripe with melodic Sprout flourishes that owe more to the likes of Gershwin, Leiber and Stoller than the traditional rock canon. In the liner notes, McAloon explains how 'I Trawl the Megahertz' was composed entirely on a computer.

"I cannot think of anything else I've written that is so dependent on technology for its existence," he wrote. "For it is a sad fact that I am a musical ignoramus who has found dedicated music software invaluable. If I asked, I still wouldn't be able to play a single bar of this record, as it was all written — after the fashion of a monkey at a word processor — straight onto the score page of my computer screen."

For my part, I discovered the album in early 2010, during a long, gloomy winter of sick leave when it arrived as the ideal comfort blanket. I remember lying on the sofa basking in its orchestral lushness,

while the spoken words featured in the 22-minute title track gently wormed their way into my consciousness. It's an extraordinarily lyrical lament of separation and disconnectedness, delivered in the hypnotic voice of American actress, Yvonne Connors.

The album is mostly comprised of instrumental tracks that drip with a certain timeless nostalgia, like the soundtrack to some forgotten 1950s American melodrama. It seems to capture the loneliness of a city jammed bumper-to-bumper with taxis, while a thousand faceless Willy Lomans tramp home in a rush hour downpour to awkward silences over their evening meal.



This atmosphere comes into play most affectingly on 'I'm 49', where a phone-in host asks "What's wrong?" to which a plummy-voiced, man responds flatly, "I'm 49, divorced". The whole experience is not unlike the dreams you have while slipping in and out of sleep having left the radio on. McAloon's voice makes just one, brief appearance on 'Sleeping Rough': "I am lost, yes lost / I'll grow a long and silver beard", he sighs, which is eerily prophetic, since that's exactly the look he now sports decades later.

'I Trawl The Megahertz' was finally released in 2003 under his own name so as not to disappoint Sprout fans who may have been expecting a more conventional record. Perhaps for that reason, it passed largely unnoticed, barring a few scattered rave reviews. It's light years away from the rest of his catalogue, but it's well worth stumping up the £25 the album appears to go for today.

Immerse yourself in it like a hot bath of indulgent melancholy and tune in to something remarkable.